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ABSTRACT

The empirical research on psychological and social adjustment of children and adolescents with visual impairments is reviewed. The dichotomy between deficit and nondeficit functioning of these youths is explored. Personality research suggests that some youth with visual impairments display minor deficits in self-concept and self-esteem. It is noted that although the results of these self-concept studies are contradictory, there is more evidence in favor of than opposed to such deficits. The evidence in favor of negative social functioning and increased interpersonal ineffectiveness among youth with visual impairments is somewhat less contradictory. Implications of the findings within the context of current cultural perspectives are discussed. (Contains 33 references.) (SW)

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PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED YOUTH: 1936-1992

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Abstract: This paper reviews the existing empirical research on psychological and social adjustment of children and adolescents with visual impairments. The dichotomy between deficit and non-deficit functioning of these youth is explored. Implications of these findings within the context of current cultural perspectives are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The dilemma of attempting to determine whether or not youth with handicaps are psychologically and socially less well adjusted than their non-handicapped peers is a puzzling one. For counselors, teachers, and other helping professionals who work with these youth, the psychological and educational literature is inconsistent and contradictory relative to personal and interpersonal adjustment. This dilemma is certainly no less puzzling for youth who experience serious vision problems, whether totally blind or partially sighted. What, then, is the nature of some of these important psychosocial issues facing visually impaired youth? An examination of relevant empirical studies provides some answers, but there is really no consensus about the effects of visual problems and vision loss on these youth. It is the purpose of this paper to provide an overview of the historical and contemporary perspectives on this issue.

In the visual impairment field, personality research has focused on two primary hypotheses: (a) that visually impaired persons exhibit a variety of psychological "problems" and (b) that they display "common" patterns of social dysfunction (Ammerman, Van Hasselt, & Hersen, 1986). This perspective has resulted from many years of studies which have tended to support such a dysfunctional view. It seems that many psychologists and educators have tended to favor evidence in support of deficits when visually impaired and non-impaired persons have been

compared. It is true that much of the extant literature is based on older studies (some of which date from the 1930s); however, this only increases the need for better understanding within the context of current perspectives on psychosocial adjustment and functioning.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AND FUNCTIONING

Let us begin with an examination of some of the deficit-oriented studies of general personality development. For example, using the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), Joffe and Bast (1978) noted less aggression and more passivity in blind youth than in partially sighted youth. Burlingham (1979) suggested that visually impaired children must constantly balance a need for increasing independence with a realistic need for dependence on their sighted peers, thus resulting in feelings of inadequacy.

Petrucci's (1953) study of blind residential school children and adolescents utilized the Bemreuter Personality Inventory (BPI). She found that 78% of her subjects had a greater need for sociability, 73% were less self-sufficient, 71% were less confident, 67% were more introverted, and 22% were more submissive than sighted norm subjects. However, an older study by Hastings (1947), also using the California Psychological Inventory, found no differences between visually impaired and sighted children and adolescents in grades one through 12.

Hastings's study provides an interesting though isolated exception to the deficiency orientation.

With the use of both the BPI and the CPI, Greenberg and Jordon (1957) found only that their totally blind subjects were less authoritative than their partially sighted subjects. Hardy (1968), who developed the Anxiety Scale for the Blind (ASB), examined blind adolescents and young adults. He found that anxiety increased with age (not a surprising finding), but that there was an inverse correlation between anxiety and intelligence -- that is, the higher one's intellectual functioning, the lower one's level of anxiety. The latter finding is one which is difficult to evaluate since there is little related research in this area, at least with respect to visually impaired youth.

Within the context of these general personality studies, we can include the concept of ego or self. Tuttle (1984), who has studied the process of adjusting to blindness, defined the concept of self as follows: "The perceptions and feelings an individual has about the self, whether realistic or not, cumulatively mold and shape the self-concept (p. 63)." Thus, self-concept could be described as the collection of attributes which an individual uses to characterize himself/herself.

Fitts (1965), author of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS), separated this collection of attributes into five categories: physical self, personal self, moral/ethical self, social self, and family self. Fitts further suggested that both cognitive and affective dimensions are represented in the

self-concept; that is, our sense of self is dependent both on who we think we are and how we feel about who we are. Coopersmith (1967) has distinguished between self-concept and self-esteem by pointing out that self-esteem is actually derived from the affective dimension. In other words, the degree to which people feel positively or negatively about themselves determines the magnitude of their self-esteem. Coopersmith also felt that self-esteem represented an attitude of approval or disapproval which individuals maintain about themselves and by which they establish their sense of capability, competence, and worth. Thus, one could correctly describe self-esteem as a type of internal evaluation which assists in shaping individuals' self-perceptions.

There have been a considerable number of studies examining the interaction between visual impairment and self-concept/self-esteem during the past 30 years (Cook-Clampert, 1981). Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the results of these studies since they tend not to be in agreement with each other. In one of the earliest of these studies, Jervis (1959) compared the self-concept of blind and sighted adolescents by means of interviews. Few between-group differences were noted except that blind students seemed more concerned about their futures and tended to endorse more extreme positions. (In other words, these students chose artificially high or low responses to items.) Zunich and Ledwith (1965), using an unidentified self-concept scale, measured blind and sighted children. Few

differences between groups were observed, although they did replicate Jervis's finding that blind subjects tended to endorse more extreme positions.

In the first empirical study of visually impaired college students, Smith (1969) surveyed 55 college students enrolled in 33 institutions. A total of 27 of these students had attended a pre-college orientation program sponsored by the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind, while the other 28 students had gone directly from high school to college. Using the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, administered during a pretest and two post-test sessions, Smith reported that, on 22 of the 29 subscales in this instrument, students who had attended the program exhibited higher self-concept than those who had not. In addition, he also reported that these same students exhibited lower levels of anxiety and higher persistence at the end of their freshman year.

Meighan (1971) used the TSCS with visually impaired adolescents from residential schools. He reported negative results for all the dimensions of self-concept measured by this instrument. Unfortunately, much of the potential strength of these results is negated by the fact that Meighan compared his adolescent scores to norm group scores (which were based on a sample of heterogeneous persons ranging in age from 12 to 68 years). Thus, it may be questionable to compare an exclusively adolescent sample with these diverse norm subjects. Head (1979), using the same instrument, was not able to replicate Meighan's (1971) results. He found no significant differences in

self-concept for students who were placed in various educational settings in terms of personal self, physical self, or social self.

On the other hand, Coker (1979), using the Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale, found that his sample of visually impaired children exhibited better self-concept than sighted norms. In a more recent study, Beaty (1992) found that a sample of blind and low-vision urban students exhibited self-concept scores on the TSCS lower than a comparison sample of sighted students. In particular, the family self subscale and moral/ethical self subscale scores of these groups were significantly different. Therefore, it is important to realize that the findings of these self-concept studies with visually impaired children and adolescents are not in agreement. At the present time it is not easy to make a precise determination as to whether or not the self-concept/self- esteem of visually impaired youth is lower than, higher than, or roughly equivalent to that of sighted peers. This must therefore raise serious questions about the validity of assuming that a deficit orientation is necessarily an appropriate conclusion.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND FUNCTIONING

Like personality research in the field of visual impairment, studies on social functioning of visually impaired youth are replete with contradictions and inconsistencies.

However, there is some consensus of opinion that at least two salient issues have emerged from these studies: (a) that visually impaired persons have fewer and poorer social experiences than their sighted peers and (b) that visually impaired persons receive inadequate and sometimes hostile feedback from their sighted peers. Thus, these opinions suggest that visually impaired youth may be at risk for interpersonal dysfunction (Ammerman, 1986). This perspective on social adjustment is, like that on self-concept, oriented towards an essentially deficit view of disabled versus non-disabled persons.

Many of the older studies on social competence were carried out utilizing instruments designed to assess populations whose levels of intellectual ability and adaptive social behavior were subnormal. Little is gained by comparing developmentally delayed populations with visually impaired populations who are not developmentally delayed. It would not be overstating the case to say that Ammerman's (1986) synthesis of the research on visual impairment and social adjustment is an accumulation of many years of research from numerous sources which attempted to suggest that visually impaired persons are "deviant" simply by virtue of their specific handicap.

Much of the early research on the social functioning of visually impaired youth was carried out using the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (VSMS) (Doll, 1947). This scale was a measure of general social competence consisting of a checklist of

developmentally based items relevant to such variables as communication, socialization, self-help, and motor performance. McKay (1936) used the VSMS with residential blind children and reported noticeable lags in social maturity for all subjects. Similarly, Bradway (1937) administered the VSMS to blind, deaf, and mobility impaired children and adolescents. Visually impaired subjects' IQs were reported to be "average," but their mean Vineland score was reported to be 62, well below the mean of 100 (based on sighted norms).

In a 1942 study, Maxfield and Fjeld administered a form of the VSMS which had been especially adapted for blind subjects to a group of visually impaired children. They obtained a mean score of 83.5, still significantly below the mean, and noted that totally blind subjects seemed to be more introverted and to have less initiative than partially sighted subjects. However, using the same adapted form of the scale, Norris, Spaulding, and Brodie (1957) found a mean score of 91.9 for visually impaired children, which was much more within the normal range. For reasons which are not clear, this finding is difficult to reconcile with the earlier findings of subnormal scores.

In a more recent study, McGuiness (1970) administered the VSMS to blind children in three educational settings: residential schools, regular schools, and itinerant programs. Vineland scores for all three groups were generally lower than sighted norms and residential students displayed lower scores than students in either of the other settings. This finding raises

the question of whether or not social adjustment among visually impaired students might be related to their specific educational placement rather than to general interpersonal dysfunction. It has been suggested that the segregated nature of residential educational placements may have a debilitating effect on the overall social and emotional development of students who spend a large amount of time in those environments.

As has been pointed out, the fundamental problem with these studies using the VSMS is that it has often been employed to assess adaptive social skills in developmentally delayed populations. This must inevitably raise questions about its validity for measuring social functioning of visually impaired children whose cognitive development is not impaired. Such a limitation robs these studies of much of their power to describe how typical visually impaired children function socially and interpersonally.

With respect to studies which have dealt more specifically with visually impaired adolescents, the previously cited study by Petrucci (1953) found that blind and low-vision high school students experienced a need for sociability 78% more often than sighted subjects. Such a view would seem to imply that these adolescents experienced increased feelings of loneliness and social detachment, at least in comparison with their non-impaired peers. Brieland (1950), using the Bell Adjustment Inventory (BAI), found that visually impaired adolescents were more likely to demonstrate social adjustment problems than

sighted adolescents. However, Hastings's (1947) previously cited study did not find significant differences in social functioning between visually impaired and sighted students. Like his findings on personality adjustment, this contradiction contributes to the problem of being able to interpret the results of these social adjustment studies.

More recent research has focused on efforts to examine individual behavioral components of social skill which might have an impact on interpersonal dysfunction in blind and low-vision subjects. Van Hasselt (1983) developed a role play test of social skill that provides for sampling of interpersonal behaviors across a variety of social domains. In their 1985(a) study, Van Hasselt, Hersen, and Kazdin compared visually impaired and sighted adolescents using this role play test. They reported that visually impaired students exhibited longer speech durations, longer speech lapses, and more frequent speech disruptions. On the other hand, blind subjects exhibited less hostile intonation and demonstrated more frequent expressions of appreciation. In another study, Van Hasselt, Kazdin, Hersen, Simon, and Mastantuono (1985[b]) compared visually impaired adolescents from residential schools and regular schools with sighted adolescents. Blind subjects exhibited fewer open-ended questions than sighted subjects and blind residential students experienced longer speech durations than blind and sighted public school students. Also, it was noted that blind residential students tended to demonstrate more

speech disruptions than the other groups.

The results of Van Hasselt's et al. (1985[a], 1985[b]) work imply that social maladjustment among visually impaired adolescents may be more related to specific social skill deficits than to global interpersonal dysfunction. It is important to point out, however, that this viewpoint is tentative and has not been supported by sufficient research to confirm its validity.

In a unique study, Crandall and Streeter (1977) examined the dating behavior of blind youth. The sample consisted of visually impaired high school and college students who were attending or had attended residential schools, public schools, and a combination of schools; the comparison group consisted of sighted high school and college students. Findings indicated that visually impaired students dated earlier than their sighted peers, had fewer serious relationships, and were more likely to date other handicapped persons. Students who had attended both residential and public schools appeared to be the most well-adjusted subjects among the handicapped group. Insofar as we know, this is the only empirical study which has attempted to scrutinize the dating behavior of visually impaired high school and college students.

In terms of general social functioning, it is worth noting that this study suggested that visually impaired students preferred to date "other handicapped persons." This may reflect the notion that they felt less comfortable with and more apprehensive of intimate relationships with sighted peers. This

possibility could add weight to the argument that visually impaired adolescents exhibit some degree of interpersonal dysfunction, particularly with respect to involvements which focus on relationships with significant others. However, an alternative explanation might be that visually impaired youth whose social networks are more circumscribed and limited may simply have fewer opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with sighted peers.

In view of research findings such as those by Crandall and Streeter (1977), it would be interesting to consider the extent to which visually impaired youth do or do not experience social support from their interpersonal relationships. Weiss (1978) has conceptualized this support in terms of the social provisions which we receive from our diverse relationships with others. The six "provisions" described by Weiss include: attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. According to Weiss, different categories of social relationships supply different types of social provisions.

Using a scale developed by Cutrona and Russell (1987) to test Weiss's (1978) theory of the provisions of social relationships, Beaty (1991) found that two subsamples of visually impaired college students did not differ in their level of social supports when compared with a similar sample of sighted college students. This finding held true for all six of Weiss's provisions, including attachment as well as social integration.

This study provided no evidence that visually impaired college students were less likely to be involved in significant relationships or to be enmeshed in a network of friendship relationships than their sighted peers. This study would seem to pose an additional challenge to the deficiency orientation.

CONCLUSION

Given the nature of the existing personality literature, it is probably accurate to assert that some visually impaired youth display minor deficits in self-concept and self-esteem. Although the results of these self-concept studies are contradictory, there is more evidence in favor of than opposed to such deficits. However, the evidence in favor of negative social functioning and increased interpersonal ineffectiveness among visually impaired youth is somewhat less contradictory. The major exception to this latter conclusion is Beaty's (1991) study in which no differences were observed in social supports for visually impaired college students. This exception may be reflective of the fact that visually impaired youth who are successful in reaching college have developed better coping mechanisms which enable them to enjoy enriched social relationships.

It is true that the issue of psychological and social adjustment of visually impaired children and youth has received a fair amount of attention from psychological and educational

researchers during the past six decades. However, the conflicting conclusions of these studies do not lead us to a better understanding of the degree to which such youth do or do not exhibit common personality problems or display characteristic patterns of social dysfunction.

It still seems possible that today's visually impaired children and youth may not necessarily be less susceptible to negative self-images and poor quality social interactions than their predecessors from earlier years. For this reason, the contradictions which arise out of the existing literature are made even more provocative.

One cannot make a de facto assumption that moves toward integration of handicapped youth into schools and society as a whole are erasing personal and interpersonal inequities. The need for additional insights into this area is therefore clear, particularly if we really do have a commitment to a society in which handicapped and non-handicapped youth can begin to interact in a mutually meaningful manner. Perhaps visually impaired children and adolescents of the 21st century will then be able to shed their presumed limitations and develop into fully functioning human beings.

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